

Baptismal Regeneration in the Anglican Formularies

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One of the doctrines that were always considered representative of the Old High Church school within Anglicanism, is that of Baptismal Regeneration. Whilst not usually controversial, there have been occasional flare-ups over it, of which the best known is the Gorham Case of 1848-50.

The roots of this doctrine lie in Holy Scripture, for example, Our Lord in St John 3:5 states:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

This Scripture, and others in similar vein, have produced a variety of interpretations from the belief that Baptismal Regeneration conveys salvation,¹ which held by, among others Christopher Bethell, (1773-1859) Bishop of St Asaph, and Henry Phillpotts (1777-1869), Bishop of Exeter, but this near *ex opere operato* view was unusual before the Tractarians. The Old High Churchmen commonly held the more-or-less Lutheran views of men such as Daniel Waterland (1683-1740) which distinguished between regeneration and renovation.² Mainstream Evangelicals held to the idea of 'Charitable Presumption' which you find in the writings of J.C. Ryle.³ Lastly, a minority of Evangelicals, such as Baptist Noel⁴ and Cornelius Gorham, believed that Baptism conveyed little more than membership of the visible Church.

As is so often the case in Anglicanism, we should look at what the oft-neglected official texts say on the matter; the *Articles of Religion*, the *Baptismal Office*, Nowell's *Middle Catechism*, and the *Prayer Book Catechism*.

Articles of Religion

First, the *Articles of Religion*:

XXVII. Of Baptism.

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian

men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed, Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.

The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

It is quite clear from the text of Article 27 that Baptism is not merely a ‘sign... or mark of difference...’ In the context of the 1500s debates about regeneration this was an implicit rebuke to the pure Zwinglian position that baptism was a covenant sign. The article then goes on to state that baptism is ‘a sign of regeneration... whereby... they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption as sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.’

For the most part this seems to be an expansion of the language used in Article IX of the *Augsburg Confession*, which runs as follows:

Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God’s grace.

They condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.

In the case of the English Article, the word ‘rightly’ would seem to be the key, and it is the interpretation of this word that produced the variety of views that existed in pre-Tractarian Anglicanism. Based on the text, it would seem equally valid to say the full effect of baptismal regeneration is dependent on either election, or subsequent ‘renovation,’ or both.

The Baptismal Service

The Baptismal service is equally clear in its understanding that in some sense, regeneration is conveyed, but more is required. It is instructive to place the declaration ‘...this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church...’ alongside the admonition at the end of the service which exhorts the parents and godparents to ensure that the child is brought up in true religion and

virtue receiving instruction in the basics of Christian doctrine as contained in the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and Apostles' Creed before being presented for confirmation. It is evident that regeneration is dependent upon the child becoming a virtuous and believing member of the Church. It is also worth noting that there is no contradiction between the position taken by the Prayer Book on baptismal regeneration, and that implicit in the Articles of Religion.

Nowell's Middle Catechism

Further support for this conditional understanding of baptismal regeneration comes from Nowell's catechism. The Latin Large Catechism was approved at the same 1562/3 Convocation as the text of the Articles of Religion. However, the most familiar version of Nowell is the Middle Catechism, produced in 1570-72, which is an abridged translation of the Large Catechism. According to the 79th Canon of 1604, it is to be taught to children following the Prayer Book catechism. Nowell's treatment of Baptism reads:

Master. What is the outward sign in Baptism?

Scholar. Water, wherein the person baptized is dipped, or sprinkled with it, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy Ghost.

Ma. What is the secret and spiritual grace?

Sch. Forgiveness of sins and regeneration: both which we have by the death and resurrection of Christ; and thereof we have this Sacrament as a Seal and Pledge.

Mark. 1.4; Act. 2.38. &c; and 23.16; Rom. 6.3, &c. Gal. 3.26, 27; 1.Pet. 3.21.

Ma. Show me the effect of Baptism yet more plainly.

Sch. Where, by nature, we are the children of wrath, and none of God's Church or household, we are by baptism received into the Church, and assured, that we are now children of God, and joined and grafted into the body of Christ, and become his members, and do grow into one body with him.

Eph. 2.3, 19, 20; Titus 3. 34. 5. &c; Matt. 28.19; Mark. 16.16; John 3.5; Rom. 6.3. &c. 1. Cor. 12.13; 2. Pet. 3.21.

Ma. What is required of persons to be baptized?

Sch. Repentance and faith.

Mark. 1.4, 15. and 16.16; Act. 2.38. &c; and 8.36, 37. &c., and 16.31, 33, 34, and 19.4, 5; and 22.16; 1.Cor. 12.13; Rom. 6.3. &c., and 13.12, 13, 14; Gal 3.26, 27; Eph. 4.20, 21.

Ma. Declare the meaning of these more largely.

Sch. First, we must truly repent us of our former life, and believe assuredly that we are cleansed from our sins by the blood of Christ, and so made acceptable to God, and that his spirit dwelleth in us. And then according to this belief and promise made in Baptism, we must endeavour ourselves to mortify our flesh, and by our good life to show that we have put on Christ, and have his Spirit given us.

Ma. Why then are Infants baptized, which by age cannot perform these things?

Sch. Because they be of God's Church; and God's blessing and promise made to the Church by Christ (in whose Faith they are baptized) pertaineth unto them. Which, when they come of age, they must themselves learn, believe, and acknowledge, and endeavour in their lives to express the duty at their Baptism promised and professed."

Nowell's view seems to fit in with that of the Lutheran and moderate Reformed theologians of the period. A judicial or sacramental Regeneration is conveyed by Baptism, but it is not effective unless accompanied or fulfilled by spiritual renovation or conversion experience. This is perfectly logical given that the Articles of Religion reject the *ex opere operato* view of sacramental efficiency. The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are not magic, but rather '*sure witnesses and effectual signs of Grace, and God's goodwill towards us by the which he doth work invisibly in us...*' Thus, the sacramental act needs to meet with the response of faith in the individual. The way in which Baptism and the Lord's Supper are explained in the Articles of Religion state that grace is made available through the outward sign, but received by faith, through the operation of the Holy Ghost.

The Prayer Book Catechism

Moving on to the Prayer Book Catechism, it is evident that the text here is abridged from Nowell's Middle Catechism in 1604 when the Prayer Book catechism was enlarged in the wake of the Hampton Court Conference. John Overall,⁵ Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, used Nowell's text to remedy some of the deficiencies of the rather meager Prayer Book Catechism of 1549:

Question. What is the outward visible sign or form in Baptism?

Answer. Water; wherein the person is baptized, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Question. What is the inward and spiritual grace?

Answer. A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness: for being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace.

Question. What is required of persons to be baptized?

Answer. Repentance, whereby they forsake sin; and Faith, whereby they steadfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.

Question. Why then are Infants baptized, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform them?

Answer. Because they promise them both by their Sureties; which promise, when they come to age, themselves are bound to perform.

Once again, the simplest way of understanding the text is to take the position that regeneration is conditional, and dependent upon the baptized child displaying faith and repentance. It is also implicit from the Prayer Book Catechism's treatment of Baptism that they will be confirmed, which is to be regarded as a taking upon oneself of the promises made in baptism. The Lutheran adoption of Confirmation in the 1700s was largely influenced by the Anglican precedent of making confirmation the rite by which someone took on the promises made in their name by their Godparents at their baptism. This understanding of confirmation was heavily emphasized by both Lutheran Pietists and Anglican Evangelicals as the 18th century progressed, and in strongly Pietist or Evangelical circles, confirmation became the rite which followed conversion.

The Gorham Judgement

Finally, we need to pay some attention to 'The Gorham Judgement' of 1850. Extreme "Calvinists" within the Anglican tradition occasionally suggest that the Anglican Church does not teach the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration based on the Gorham Judgement, but this is either a misunderstanding, or wishful thinking on their part. The background to the Gorham Judgement is that the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts subjected the Rev. Cornelius Gorham to a lengthy doctrinal examination focusing on the latter's views on Baptism. Phillpotts, an Old High Churchman, seems to have been a protégé of both Martin Routh⁶, the President of Magdalen College, Oxford, and of Shute Barrington⁷, Bishop of Durham from 1791 to 1826. Phillpotts was always vigilant against what he regarded as heresy and refused to institute Gorham as rector of Brampton Speke,

Devon, because Phillpotts had concluded, after a lengthy examination of Gorham, that he rejected the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration. Gorham, a graduate of the then Evangelical-leaning Queen's College⁸, Cambridge, had been in trouble for his views before. Bishop Dampier of Ely had been reluctant to ordain him back in 1812 but had eventually given him the benefit of a doubt. Phillpotts' refusal to institute resulted in the whole matter being referred first to the Court of Arches, which upheld Phillpotts right to refuse institution, and then to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which ruled that Gorham's views on Baptism were within permitted parameters interpretation of the Thirty-Nine Articles. A few Anglo-Catholics such as H.E. Manning, Henry Wilberforce,⁹ and T. E. Allies flipped their lids over the judgement and went to Rome but compared to the massive Evangelical secession that would have occurred had Gorham's views been deemed unacceptable, the damage to the Church of England was extremely minor.¹⁰ Most Anglo-Catholics understood that the judgment did not narrow the bounds of comprehension, and they remained free to hold their own views on the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration, as did the Evangelicals. It must be remembered that both Henry Phillpotts, who held a very high view of Baptismal Regeneration, and Cornelius Gorham, who held a very low one, were to some degree on the extremes of Anglican opinion at the time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be stated that, as always, the Anglican formularies maintain an Augustinian view of the sacraments as having two parts, the outward sign, and the inward grace. In the case of baptism, Traditional High Churchmanship emphasized the role of the outward sign, the actual Baptism, whilst the Evangelicals preferred to emphasize the inward spiritual grace by speaking of conversion, renovation, or, in 18th-century lingo, the change, when discussing Regeneration. Basically, Evangelicals tended to teach that one had to 'opt-in' by conversion, that is a definite affirmation of one's belief in Christ, whilst High Churchmen saw it more as a case of opting out of the covenant relationship that had been established in Baptism. In both cases, it is the faith of the individual, which is itself the gift of God, that ultimately determines whether baptism regeneration is effective.

The UECNA maintains the traditional breadth of Anglican doctrine as it is stated in the Articles, Homilies, Liturgy, and Catechism of the Church. With regards to Baptismal Regeneration, we accept both the traditional High Church, and the traditional Anglican Evangelical views of the doctrine of Baptism.

Notes:

1. Bethell in his examination of Baptismal doctrine laid great emphasis on the idea that Baptism had to be rightly received. However, he firmly believed that those who 'lead their lives according to this beginning' would be saved.
2. Ray Sutton's "Signed, Sealed, and Delivered" (CAP, 2001) is a modern treatment of Waterland's views on Baptism. Waterland's work is entitled "Letters on Lay Baptism" ed. Nutcombe, r/p 2018.
3. Ryle returns to this theme many times in his writings. Born in 1816, Ryle represents the increasingly low sacramental views of mid-nineteenth century Evangelicals faced with the claims of the Tractarians and Ritualists. Older Evangelicals such as John Bird Sumner (1780-1862, Archbishop of Canterbury 1848-62) tended to hold to 'conditional regeneration.'
4. Baptist W. Noel (1798-1873) left the Church of England during the Gorham Controversy and became a Baptist. His was one of the few Evangelical departures from the Church of England caused by this Controversy.
5. John Overall (1559-1619) an anti-Calvinist who was successively Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield (1614-18), and Bishop of Norwich (1618/9). He had been elected as Regius Professor of Divinity in 1595 as a tacit rebuke to Whitgift's attempts to force the Calvinist Lambeth Articles on the whole Church.
6. Martin Routh 1755-1854, President of Magdalen College, Oxon., 1791-1854, Patristics Scholar, and something of a touchstone of High Church orthodoxy to the Tractarians.
7. The Rt. Rev. and Hon. Shute Barrington 1734-1826, Bishop of Llandaff, and then Durham, was connected to the High Church Hackney Phalanx in the last twenty years of his life.
8. Isaac Milner, an Evangelical pioneer, and Wilberforce's tutor during his Grand Tour, was President of Queen's, Cambridge, during this period.
9. The story of the Wilberforce brothers, and Manning is dealt with in David Newsome's "The Parting of Friends" (Eerdmans, 1993)
10. A small number of clergymen left the Church of England after 1844 in protest at Tractarian aggression against Evangelicalism and formed "Free" Anglican Evangelical congregations which were usually aligned with the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. These eventual coalesced into the Free Church of England in 1863. The FCE's Declaration of Principles, modified from that of the REC and adopted in 1927, states that it rejects the position that regeneration "invariably" accompanies baptism.

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